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INISHBOFIN—AN ATLANTIC ISLAND*

T. W. Freeman

114 *Mr. Freeman, Reader in Economic Geography in the Victoria University of Manchester, was previously head of the Geography Department in the University of Dublin. His book, "Ireland: its Historical, Social and Economic Geography," was published in 1950; and a second book, "Pre-Famine Ireland: a Study in Historical Geography," appeared in September, 1957.*

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121 IRELAND'S decline in population has been made possible by the [167] availability of work elsewhere for her people. This article deals with one of the poorest and most isolated districts of the country, an island off the [434] west coast which, for over 60 years, has received government help in various forms, as well as money from relations in America and in Britain. And the [794] island, Inishbofin, has a reasonably contented community not untypical of many in the west of Ireland, all of them Roman Catholic in religion and depending on the priest for the main leadership. Emigration continues, but those left behind and those who return to the island have a leisured way of

114 *The material for this paper was partly collected during a visit with the Geographical Society of Ireland in July, 1954. The author visited about half the houses on the island of 124 Inishbofin, and for one-quarter of the 96 households recorded the numbers of the household, information on those who had emigrated, the area of the farm, number of stock, methods of selling produce, and other sources of income, such as fishing or work on the roads. Within this range the answers were generally reliable, but no direct financial inquiry would be fruitful and on Inishbofin the number of sheep was [578] almost invariably understated as there are jealousies between households about the use of commonage (see p. 205). In one case a farmer [231] told the writer that he had "half-a-dozen sheep or so" but the following morning he had 23 lined up in his field for the dealer to see. It was impossible to resist the comment over the garden wall, "A fine lot of sheep this morning."

[113] Other aspects of Inishbofin are discussed in three articles in *Irish Geography*, Vol. 3, 1956, pp. 123–135, by J. P. Haughton, T. Jones Hughes, and J. A. K. Grahame.

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living rarely encountered in the modern world. As will be shown later, however, the island people maintain their simple but not uncomfortable way of living only by help from outside: if one believes that every inhabited area must make its economic contribution to the state, Inishbofin is a debtor on a considerable scale.

"A small and dwindling population maintain a precarious existence on the Atlantic fringe of our industrial society and present upon the whole an aspect of decline and, in some parts, of dereliction." In these words the Scottish crofting report[1] names a problem, common alike to the Atlantic fringe of Ireland and of Scotland, which was investigated by two Congested Districts Boards, in Ireland from 1891–1923[2] and in Scotland from 1897–1911[3]; in both countries the powers of these boards were transferred to the general administration of agricultural affairs. One by one the islands off the west coast of Ireland are being abandoned[4] but on Inishbofin this prospect does not seem immediate: past and present government assistance has resulted in a planned

[1] Department of Agriculture for Scotland, Report of the Commission of enquiry into crofting conditions. H.M.S.O., Edinburgh, 1954, Cmd. 9091, para. 281, p. 87.

[2] For a general treatment, T. W. Freeman: *Geogr. Res.*, Vol. 23, 1943, pp. 1–14.

[3] Cmd. 9091, 1954, para. 265, p. 81.

[4] T. W. Freeman: *Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 120, 1954, p. 332.

167 657 landscape combined with financial help of such varied forms that one may see the welfare state in action. Inishbofin, four miles beyond the coast of Connemara (10° 10′ W. to 10° 15′ W.), [131] is separated by a strait almost one mile wide from the nearest inhabited island, Inishark. Some of the neighboring 311 small uninhabited islands are useful sheep pastures and others merely reefs 132 dangerous to shipping. In calm weather these islands rise above deep clear waters, but in storms Atlantic waves send spray to a height of 300 feet and more[a] and a dangerous swell sweeps through intricate channels. The inhabitants, farmers and farmer-fishermen are at the mercy of the weather. In 1954 the dry spring resulted in a short growth of oats and barley straw and a feeble growth of potatoes; the fishermen's lobster pots were swept out to sea, replaced and then swept out again; and the hookers could not be taken out in waters always dangerous but vastly more so when the weather consists of an apparently endless series of deep depressions.

505 Isolation is a major problem, but on four days a week in summer and three days a week in winter a hooker runs from the pier at Cleggan to the island, where it is rarely able to berth at the pier, so that all passengers and goods must be put over the side into a curragh and rowed ashore. In winter the island may be storm-bound for as much as a fortnight at a time, and almost [261] every household has a bag of meal kept for such an emergency. Special arrangements have to be made for the shipment of cattle; fish can be taken for sale to the mainland in rowing boats only during favorable weather; and no eggs are sold owing to transport problems

[137] [a] On the cliffs of the island the vegetation is halophytic and consists generally of a low sward of seapink (*Pamma maritima*).

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000 problems. The range of commodities
433 available on the island is restricted. But the farms are similar to those in Connemara, and the fishing—especially for lobsters—may in some years be distinctly profitable. Peat is still available and no coal is imported. Once the peat is used up, it is hard to maintain existence on these remote islands. And if the population diminishes to very small numbers, its very maintenance may become precarious or impossible as on Inishark (p. 208). Inishbofin's present population is maintained partly
434 by the help of various government
657 schemes, by the remittances of relatives,
167 or—in comparatively few instances—by periodic spells of residence in England to make money as laborers or domestic servants. Incidentally, the
[191] people are entirely English-speaking: the Irish speech was lost almost 60 years ago.

291 Home spinning and weaving of fab-
438 rics is now extinct. In 1893, it was noted that most of the clothing was
[286] made from "homespun and home-dyed woollen fabrics" but that "imported shop clothes of inferior quality" were replacing them.[8] Inishbofin people have no longer the homespun clothes still worn by the people of the Aran islands in Galway Bay: only one old woman was seen in the traditional red skirt (or petticoat) dyed with imported madder. Clothes are now bought in the local shops, or during occasional visits to Clifden, which is "town" to the islanders, or to Galway, or from mail order houses in Dublin. Even a journey
484 to Clifden involves seven miles in a hooker and seven miles along a road with no public conveyance, and Galway
[491] is a further 50 miles by bus as the light railway was closed in 1925.

[8] C. R. Browne: The Ethnography of Inishbofin and Inishark, County Galway, Proc. Royal Irish Acad., 3rd series, Vol. 3, 1893–96, p. 354.

[p. 203(B)]

[Text continues on p. 204(B)]

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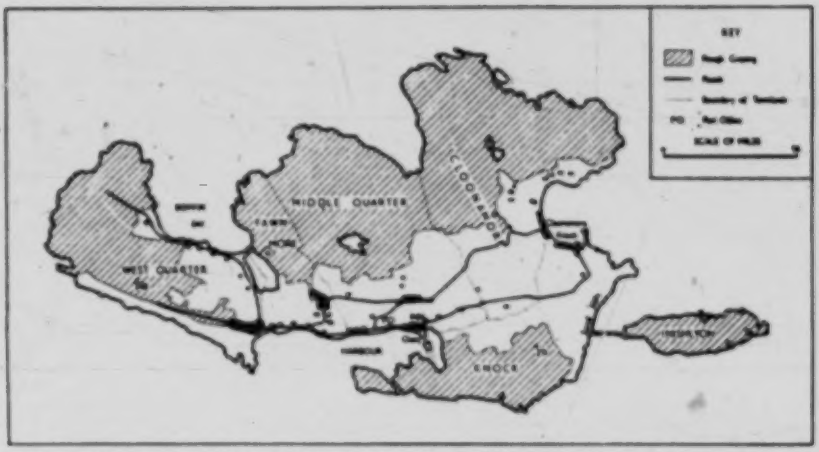

FIG. 1. The townlands of Inishbofin. Inishlyon has no inhabitants, but is used as sheep pasture. Cloonamore and Knock appear as a single line of houses on the shore but are in different townlands. The boundaries of the rough pasture and the distribution of houses were mapped in July, 1954. (Based on Ordnance Survey, 25 inches to 1 mile, Co. Galway, sheet 9, 1898, by permission of the Minister for Finance of Ireland.)

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000 railway was closed in 1925. But the
206 Inishbofin postmistress operates a radio-telephone.

The Landscape

Three types of landscape are char-
133 acteristic: first, craggy hills of no great altitude, with a maximum of 292 feet in Westquarter, 288 feet in Middlequarter, and 271 feet in Knock; second, the farmed rolling countryside ranging from sea level to about 150 feet, and having some natural drainage; and, third, an area of sand dunes and blown
[311] sand in the extreme east, once settled and farmed but now used only for rough pasture. The larger of the two lakes, Lough Bofin, is held back by a magnificent shingle ridge in a fine bay, partially protected from strong winds and high seas but open to northerly gales. The coast is rocky almost every. where and there are some splendid cliffs
[504] with outlying stacks: the best harbor is the long inlet on the south side. No recent geological work has been done

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133 here, but the original memoir[7] states that the rocks are mainly schists and gneisses, dipping at sharp angles of 30°–89°, much broken by faults and seared by sills and dikes. In short, it is a characteristic pre-Cambrian area.

314 Peat several feet deep is found in the basins between the numerous small hills. Many people cut "scraws," that is, the surface layers of the rough pasture. This time-hallowed practice, noted with disapproval by the Congested Districts Board inspectors 60 years ago,[8] increases year by year the area of exposed rock; it may well be that throughout the peat-consuming areas of Ireland—and of Scotland also—this has happened.[9] As one observer put it, "every

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[7] Memoirs of the Geological Survey, Explanatory Memoir . . . sheets 73 and 74 (in part), 83 and 84, Dublin 1876, pp. 39–42.

[8] Congested Districts Board, Base Line Reports, Clifden district, 1891 (and many more such comments in other reports).

[9] F. Fraser Darling: West Highland Survey, London, 1955, pp. 43, 67, 272–276. See especially an interesting survey of what (in Scotland) is called "skinned land" in Lewis by M. Macdonald.

[Text continues on p. 205(B)]

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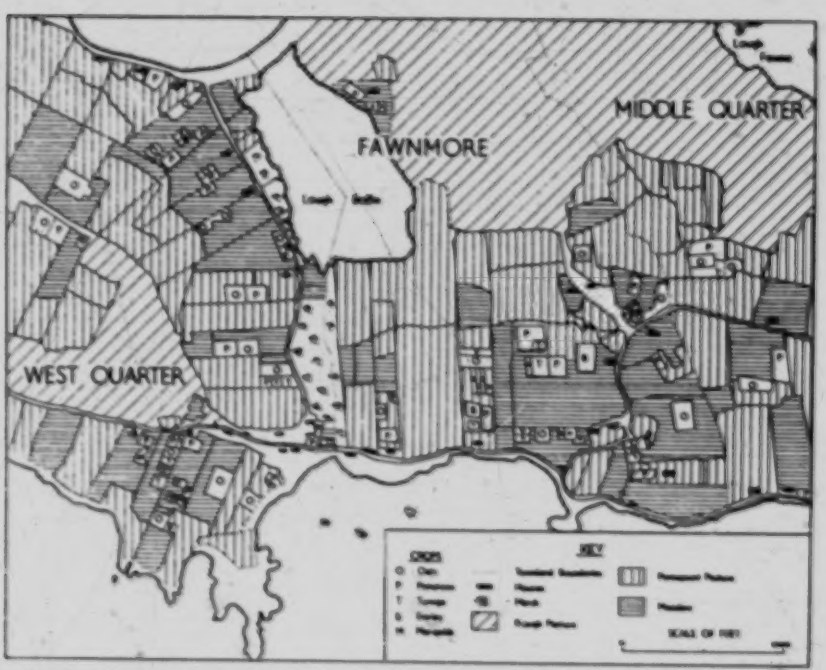

FIG. 2. Land use in part of Inishbofin. The rectangular pattern is characteristic of many areas "striped" by the Congested Districts Board. Small crop "gardens," fields of meadow and improved pasture, exist beside each farmhouse, and roads lead to the "commonage." (Field mapping done by Mr. Clifford Hargreaves, B.A., of the Department of Geography, University of Manchester, in July 1954, to whom grateful acknowledgment is made.)

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314 year the feed of a dozen sheep is burnt in the homes."

Agricultural life depends on the use 311 of the "commonage," or rough pasture, 231 and the improved land, which is almost entirely drift fertilized by seaweed and 632 farmyard manure. Two-thirds of the island's 2480 acres is rough pasture, used for the sheep, cattle, ponies, and donkeys, as well as for peat collection. Figure 1 shows that the island is divided into five townlands, in each of which the commonage is shared, with the result that a farmer may take his animals not to the rough pasture near his holding but to ground as much as a mile away. There is a band of farm lands 311 stretching from lough Bofin to the har-

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311 bor, and then with no break to Cloon-
amore on the east side.

This island has a planned landscape.
311 The roads of the commonage pastures
657 and peat bogs have been built under relief schemes and the farms include seven acres of improved land, "striped" or defined by the Congested Districts Board after the land was acquired from its owner, Mr. C. Allies, in 1907.[*]
342 Since then new houses of concrete, with
511 a concrete floor, roofed with asbestos
657 slate or, rarely, ordinary slates, have

[*] Congested Districts Board for Ireland, 18th report for the year ending March 31, 1909, Cmd. 4927, p. 139. The price paid was £8301, including £401 for tenants' interests. Up to March 31, 1915, £7047 was spent on the island, 23rd report, 1915, Cmd. 8076.

342 511 [651] been built for almost the entire population. In 1893 it was said that there were no outbuildings or cattle-sheds, so that peat was stacked in a corner of the cottage with the fowls roosting on it, the pigs in a pen beside the fireplace, the cattle in a pen at the other end of the room, and the farm implements and fishing tackle in the rafters.[11] Now the [343] old houses are the outbuildings, still thatched, with oat straw (not rye as formerly) laid on sods and tied down with home-made straw ropes weighted with large stones. Only five thatched houses were still inhabited in 1954. Some of the thatch has sprouting oats and some of it is rotten, but, when a roof is beyond further repair, it is all stripped off and the sodding and thatching begins again. Happily, corrugated iron is not used as it cannot stand the weather.

Farming

241 Agricultural practice is almost uniform: an acre or so is divided between oats, potatoes, and—in a few cases—barley, and there is generally a small patch of turnips, mangolds, and, less frequently, cabbage (Fig. 2). Onions, carrots, and parsnips were rarely seen. The ground used for crops is called the "garden," and its fertility is maintained by using animal manure and seaweed, and also by rotating the crops. Strange (or "foreign") seed is favored, and [657] bought at a cheap rate under a government scheme. The remainder of the farmstead consists of a varying amount of meadow, generally 1–3 acres, and some pasture. The precious crops are [231] carefully walled, but some of the farmers open their fields to the cattle and sheep after the harvest, partly as a means of natural fertilizing.

231 439 Each farmer has one or two cows and

[11] C. R. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

[p. 206(A)]

231 the calves born each year are normally
439 kept until they are two years old, when they are sold either to dealers on the island or to visiting dealers from the mainland. No cattle are slaughtered for meat on the island at present as it pays better to send them on to the fairs at Clifden. The dealers wait for a favorable opportunity of selling the stock and the farmers agreed that these arrangements were far better than individual visits to the fair by the difficult route described on p. 203. The policy
654 of grading up stock, favored by the
232 Congested Districts Board,[13] has been highly successful; there are accredited bulls of the Hereford and Aberdeen Angus breeds available on the island.
234 No butter is sold and little is ever bought. As one of the islanders put it,
437 "You wouldn't understand our ways, sir. If we have a bit of butter over, there's sure to be someone who can do with it, so we just let them have it."
236 Sheep are kept in large numbers and pastured on the common lands; there are probably at least 1000 sheep owned by the farmers on this island. The sheep are sold to the butcher for the island's only meat supply, or to dealers for eventual sale on the mainland, and the wool clip is sold to a Dublin firm which sends a representative to the island in September. No pigs are kept,
231 nor any goats, and each farmer has only a few fowls since there is no way of
[235] selling eggs or chickens; only a small number of people have geese, ducks, or turkeys. During the 1914–1918 war, eggs were sold at 3d. each for export, but transport difficulties and the failure to develop any marketing scheme have long since extinguished the trade. The lack of pigs, which may seem surprising,

[113] [13] W. L. Micks: An account of the constitution, administration and dissolution of the Congested Districts Board for Ireland from 1891 to 1923, Dublin, 1925, pp. 27–33.

[p. 206(B)]

231 is said to be due to the expense of importing feedstuffs. Donkeys and Con-
[492] nemara ponies are kept as draft animals, and almost everything is conveyed in panniers. There are only five carts
[493] on the island, of which the first was made in 1907 by a local carpenter from one he had seen on the mainland. The
335 two carpenters make anything required, including lobster pots, fishing nets, furniture, doors, windows, and hand barrows, which consist of two shafts joined by slats and a single wheel in the rear, all of wood.

221 Digging and manuring of the land begins in late February, and seaweed is brought from the shore as needed. The potatoes are planted about St. Patrick's Day (March 17); oats, two to three weeks later; barley and mangolds at the end of April or in May. Most calves are born from March to May. In dry years peat is cut from May onwards, laid out to dry, and eventually stacked in ricks six feet high secured by large stones, or placed against a stone wall. Apart from routine work, there is little to do until the hay harvest, generally in August or September, though sometimes a cut is made in July (as in 1954) with the hope of a second crop in the autumn. Oats and barley are harvested in September, after which the main potato digging takes place, though some are dug earlier for the household. From October to late February, there is little to do except tend the stock, though some men build walls four feet high at
[653] 12/6 a perch or mend roads under government schemes. Few farmers make the ricks of peat beside their houses so commonly seen in Ireland; most fetch it as required.

The Sea

228 Encouragement of fishing was a major aim of the Congested Districts Board, and from the eighteen-nineties to the

228 1914–1918 war both the curing stations were used. The first of these was built by Mr. Allies about 1892 and the second by the Board in 1897.[13] In 1898 during the mackerel fishing season, as many as 75 carts a day passed along the hilly road from Cleggan to Clifden with some 1000 boxes of fish to be sold in Dublin[14]; and in 1912, 8754 cwts. of mackerel, valued at £2211, were landed at Cleggan.[15] The fishermen were "the best and most practical . . . on the west coast" in 1892;[16] today, a large number of men have a curragh (made for £30) and fish for the family, but only four hookers, each manned by five men, are now used in the white fish trade. In good years a man may make £50 or more by trapping lobsters and crayfish, which are stored in tanks in the harbor and in Bofin Bay, then taken for a month's feeding in a vast tank near Cleggan, and finally conveyed over a hundred miles by lorry to the Shannon airport for air transport to Paris. The fishermen receive £3 5s. a (baker's) dozen for crayfish, weighing 5–6 lbs., or £1 15s. for a dozen lobsters, weighing up to 3 lbs. From May to September pots are set round the coasts—a long basket is set for crayfish and a smaller one for lobsters. Some of the dozen or so men in this trade make their own with osiers specially grown, but pots are also supplied by the merchant or made by carpenters. Other marine resources are negligible, though carrageen moss is sold to an agent at 5/- a stone. This naturally gelatinous product, used to make a kind of blancmange, is collected from the rocks between February and August. It is possible

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[13] Congested Districts Board for Ireland, 7th Report, 1898, H.M.S.O., Dublin, Cmd. 9003, p. 23.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[15] Congested Districts Board for Ireland, 20th Report, 1912, Cmd. 6553, p. 80.
[16] C. R. Browne: *op. cit.*, p. 350.

[p. 207(B)]

228 to collect one stone in an hour. Kelp
[381] (seaweed) burning for iodine on the beaches was almost extinct by 1894.[17]

Settlement and Population

361 Of the 96 houses counted as inhabited, 53 are in five hamlets and another six in a loose cluster near the harbor. There is no village as the term is commonly understood, though the main center is beside the harbor, where the inn occupies the one-time "big house" of the Allies family, with the church and the Post Office a short distance away. In
[444] all there are eight shops, none of which is recognizable from the outside, as everyone knows them: one is attached to the inn, another to the Post Office, a third occupies a specially built room in a farmyard, and the rest are in front rooms of houses. All the houses except about six have land attached.

Is this nucleated settlement as such?
361 On the first Ordnance Survey map
178 (1838) there were large clusters of houses
621 and on the 1898 map the vast majority of the houses were in clusters. The redistribution of land and building of new houses has broken up many hamlets or made new ones, for example in Knock townland (405 acres) where an old hamlet on a sandy site has been replaced by a new one on drier ground by the shore, with 15 of the townland's 17 houses. In Cloonamore (663 acres)
361 eight houses are placed along the shore
621 and eleven others scattered over the hillside; in Middlequarter (608 acres) there are eleven houses in the main hamlet, six beside the harbor and eleven others at various points beside the shore or on side roads; in Fawnmore (199 acres) six houses out of sixteen are in a loosely defined hamlet; and in West-
361 quarter (523 acres) nine houses out of

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 349.

[p.208(A)]

[961] sixteen are in a similarly formless cluster.

167 Emigration has entered deeply into the fabric of life: in 1841, Inishbofin
161 with Inishark had 1612 people, but ten years later there were only 1047. A rise to 1236 in 1861 and 1262 in 1871 was followed by a drop to 997 in 1891, when there were 215 families of whom one-quarter were said to be "very poor."[18] Steadily the population declined, to 510 in 1936, 406 in 1946, and 341 in 1951, and now less than 300 (including 40 in Inishark). One-quarter of the families were interviewed in 1954; of these only one-third were "normal families" of parents with children. In the school there were only 29 children aged 5–14, whereas the normal figure would be 48. On Inishark there are now only nine able-bodied men, six of whom are needed to man a boat seaworthy in winter, with the result that an epidemic might be disastrous. Permanent emigration to Britain, or, if possible, to America, is favored by the young and adventurous. Even in 1893 seasonal emigration to Britain as harvesters or domestics was declining,[19] though a number of people went to America for several years, saved money, and returned to the islands. A large proportion of the people have spent several years in the United States. In many cases a family has its older relatives in America, its younger ones in Britain.

Conclusion

657 Having reviewed the economic geography of this island certain conclusions emerge. First, the present relative comfort of the population has been made possible only by past and present government assistance bestowed with lib-

[113] [18] Congested Districts Board, Base Line Reports, Clifden district, 1891.
[19] C. R. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

[p.208(B)]

657 erality. Houses, farms more than twice the size of those normal before the days of the Congested Districts Board, doles to those needing them from November to April, subsidized schemes of building walls that seem in places scarcely necessary, and no direct taxation—all contribute to the general social welfare. In addition the family allowances and old age pensions help in many households, but these are general state benefits. During the winter many householders are short of money, once the money for the stock has been spent.[20]

167 Second, emigration has been of vast benefit to the community; money comes
434 in to most of the homes from America[21] or Britain, or both. And emigration has made possible the making of farms which, with the use of commonage, can hardly support a family in comfort but can give basic sustenance; though, as more and more farms are united, some men will prosper, especially those who fish as well as farm.

443 Third, it is regrettable that the lack of commercial facilities means that eggs,
489 poultry, butter, and other produce cannot be sold; in many parts of Ireland the sale of eggs to grocers and milk to

[273] [20] The consumption of stout at the only inn averages eight barrels a week in summer, but only three barrels a week in winter. The standard
[304] content of a barrel is 256 pints.
[21] Many of the children are dressed in Amer-
[291] ican clothes.

[p. 209(A)].

443 creameries or to dealers brings useful
489 income. The difficulty lies in transport, especially during the winter when the isolation is most acutely felt.

484 Fourth, remote and isolated as their island may be, some of its people have seen much of the world. It is unlikely that many of the young people will remain here in the future; on the other hand, some former emigrants have come back to rest with thankfulness after their labors elsewhere. As one of them said, "America is a good place for the young, but this is a good place when you're old."

000 To summarize, Inishbofin now is neither a tragic island nor a romantic enclave of ancient ways. It is an area in which the work begun by the Congested Districts Board has borne fruit, whose people live reasonably well by crofting standards thanks to the help of emigrants and of the state. So long as the fuel holds out, there seems to be no reason why this island should not remain inhabited; but the problems of so curious a population age structure (p. 208) need investigation by a sociologist, and the cost of maintaining this community to the state and its relatives could well form a subject for an economist. For this island is not, and presumably cannot be, self-supporting under modern conditions.

[p. 209(B)]